

SILLY QUESTIONS, WHO YOU GONNA CALL? 311; CITY OPERATORS TAKE ALL QUERIES

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Somerville city operators answer all kinds of pressing questions: Why didn't the trash truck come down my street today? How can I appeal a parking ticket? Oh yeah, and how's that new restaurant around the corner?

Since the city initiated its 311 system six months ago, the three operators have answered 15,000 calls from Somerville residents on just about every topic imaginable. More than a few of them have had absolutely nothing to do with city government.

When a recent power outage shut off electricity at Alibrandi's Barber Shop, a customer in the middle of a haircut called to ask the operator's advice. He told operator Eileen Costa his half-cut hair made him look like an "idiot" and wanted to know what he should do.

Costa answered the call as if it were the most ordinary of inquiries, suggesting the man go to a nearby restaurant for lunch and a few adult beverages while he waited for the electricity to be restored, she said.

The 311 program was designed to help residents navigate city government bureaucracy and provide good customer service. Residents can simply dial 311 from their home phones and most cellphones, and operators call other city departments to get answers to their questions rather than transferring the caller from department to department. The one-stop number is to make it easier to report such problems as potholes needing repair and rat sightings. The trash issue generates the most calls.

But operators find themselves being asked questions on a number of topics, like what time the movie starts and directions to just about any place in the city. A couple of weeks ago, someone called to ask which restaurant her friend would like a gift certificate to. (The caller and operator decided on Ninety Nine Restaurant.)

"Every day there's something we've never heard before," said Sean Murphy, the city's director of constituent services and 311.

Residents who call in with questions in Spanish and Portuguese are directed to Elena Viveiros, who is fluent in both. Now a number of callers ask for her by name.

The operators' City Hall office has also become a clearinghouse for up-to-the-minute information about things happening in Somerville. City spokesman Tom Champion said the 311 operators often know about breaking news before he does. Last month, 311 operators informed him about a power outage in Teele Square and already knew the cause, number of households affected, and the expected duration.

"We're the eyes and ears of the city," Murphy said.

No matter how bizarre the call, the operators at City Hall make it their goal to be friendly and helpful.

When Costa got a call from a woman who locked herself out of her house while carrying a dead mouse outside to bury it, Costa promised to send a firefighter over to help her get back inside.

The operators get a good chuckle out of some of the calls, like the one operator Pam Mitchell fondly refers to as "the elastic lady."

Mitchell said the woman called this winter to report that a city vehicle was idling in front of her house. Instead of walking outside and asking the driver to move his truck it was too cold, the woman said she had opened up a window and was shooting rubber bands at the driver's side window of the truck, Mitchell recalled. She had not succeeded in catching the driver's attention and wanted help.

Mitchell apologized that the sound was disturbing the woman and promised to call the Department of Public Works, which radioed the worker and told him to move his truck.

"When you get a call like that, it makes your day," said Mitchell, who smiled picturing an older lady shooting rubber bands out of her house.

Mitchell said she keeps a smile on her face while she talks to callers to ensure she comes across as upbeat. But sometimes she doesn't have to. One Friday earlier this month, a woman called up to ask if the new Spike's Junkyard Dogs restaurant location on Elm Street had opened, a call Mitchell was clearly pleased to receive.

"I just had a Spike's Junkyard dog the other day," Mitchell told the woman excitedly. "It is open, and I recommend them highly."